

COVID-19 ISSUE BRIEF

Incidence of Suicide in Milwaukee County during the COVID-19 Pandemic *Exploring demographic trends during the pandemic compared to previous five years*

BACKGROUND

The COVID-19 pandemic is a serious public health threat, not only because people are at risk of contracting the virus, but because supplementary risk factors created by the pandemic can cause negative health outcomes. The fear, self-isolation, physical distancing, financial stressors and stigma of contracting COVID-19 are all risk factors that can have an impact on mental health and *may* make death by suicide an unintended consequence of the pandemic.^{2, 7}

A few municipalities across the country have reported increases in the number of individuals who have died by suicide or attempted suicide. Doctors at the John Muir Medical Center in Walnut Creek, California saw a year's worth of suicide attempts in a four week period during their Shelter-in-Place order.⁴ In Fresno County, California, there were more reported suicides in the month of June than in any month in the last three years.⁶

The U.S. suicide rate has increased 35% since 1999, and in 2018, more than 48,000 Americans died by suicide, ranking it the 10th leading cause of death in the country.¹ In Milwaukee County since 2015, there have been nearly 250 deaths by suicide, which equates to at least one person dying by suicide in the county each week for the past five years.⁵

LANGUAGE MATTERS!

Help destigmatize the language used to describe suicide

SAY: "Died by suicide," "took their own life," or "killed themselves"

INSTEAD OF: "Committed suicide," "completed suicide," or "successful suicide"

WHY: This language can imply that suicide is a crime or sin. In addition, words like "completed" and "successful" are often associated with positive outcome.

Adapted from Prevent Suicide Greater Milwaukee's "Language Matters!"

EXPLORING THE DATA

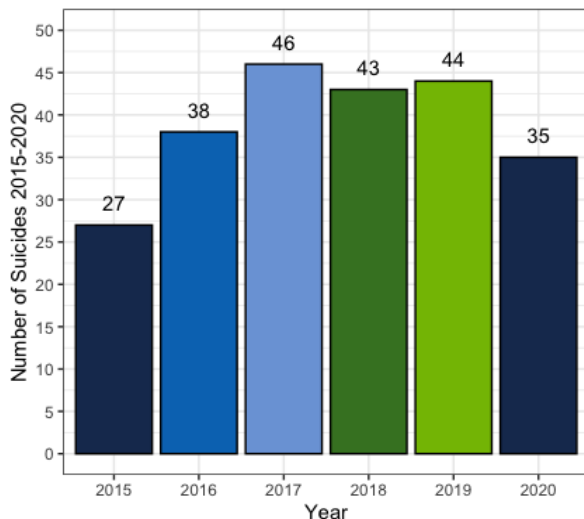


Figure 1: Deaths by suicide during COVID-19 pandemic period (March–June 2020) and during the same time period in the five years prior (2015–2019).

Milwaukee County had recorded fewer suicides in the period from March–June in 2020 (i.e. 35 suicides) than during that same time period in the four years prior.

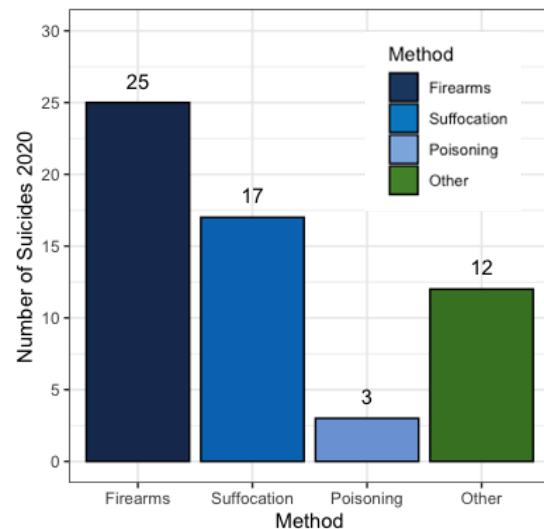


Figure 2: Deaths by method of suicide in Milwaukee County, January to June 2020.

Most deaths by suicide in 2020 involved the use of a firearm, followed by deaths by suicide involving suffocation, which includes hanging, asphyxiation, or drowning. Other methods, including blunt force injuries and incise injuries, were the third most common method. This is different from the previous five years, in which poisoning, including any form of drug toxicity or CO poisoning, was the third most common method.

EXPLORING THE DATA, Continued —

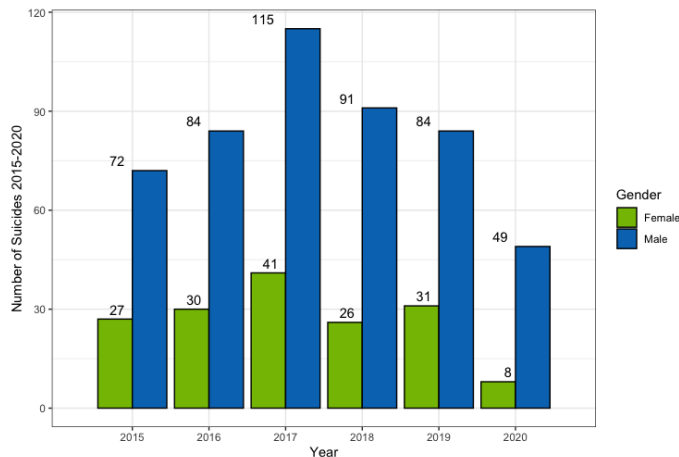
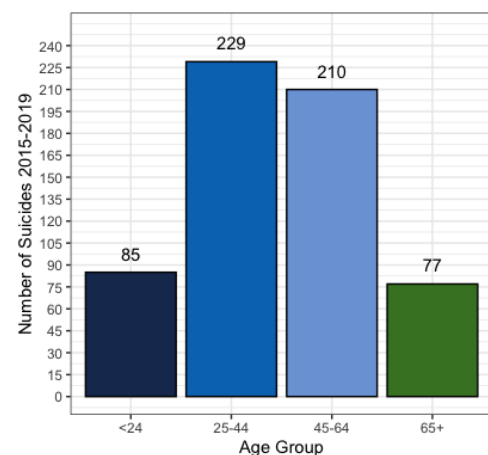
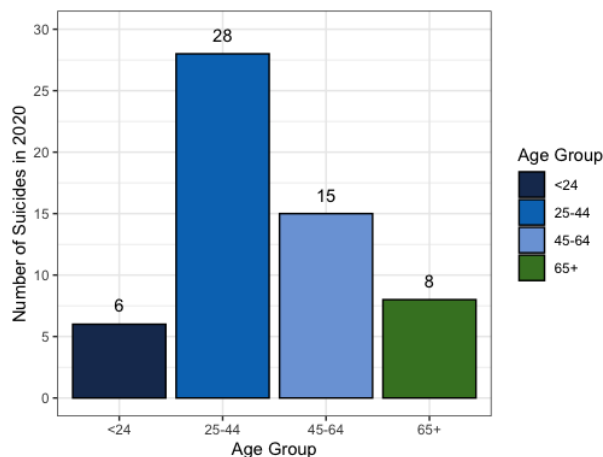


Figure 3a (Upper Left): Number of deaths by suicide in Milwaukee County January-June 2020 by age group.

Figure 3b (Left): Number of deaths by suicide in Milwaukee County 2015-2019 by age group. The highest number of suicides have occurred in the 25-44 age group, with the second highest among the 45-64 age group. In 2020, there have not been any significant differences in these age trends.

Figure 4 (Upper Right): Number of deaths by suicide in Milwaukee County 2015-June 2020 by gender. The number of suicides in Milwaukee County are consistently higher among males than among females. This reflects national trends, as death by suicide among males is nearly four times higher than among females in the United States.³

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In Milwaukee County between 2015-2019, 77.4% of deaths by suicide occurred among individuals identifying as White, 12.3% of deaths by suicide were among individuals identifying as Black or African American, and 5.9% of deaths by suicide were among individuals identifying as Hispanic/Latinx; all other racial groups made up less than 2% of deaths by suicide in the county. In 2020, these trends have been very similar.

Ultimately, despite the increased presence of risk factors for suicide, including economic distress, and overall stress related to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, Milwaukee County has not experienced an increase in the number of suicides between March and June 2020 in comparison to previous years.

However, suicide is still a serious issue in Milwaukee County that affects our community. Community leaders should continue to monitor suicide data and address risk factors that may increase the incidence of suicide because of the pandemic. It is important that local and national resources continue messaging to connect individuals experiencing stress and hopelessness to support. It is also important that resources continue to be more widely available via telehealth and other electronic methods.

If you are concerned about yourself or a loved one, call the Milwaukee County Crisis Line at 1-414-257-7222, The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK (8255), or text the Hopeline at x741741. **For imminent safety concerns, call 911.**

CITATIONS

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- Milwaukee County Medical Examiner. (2020). *Suicide deaths by year and cause 2015-2020*. Milwaukee County, WI.
- Oliveira, J. (2020, July 13). *Fresno County sees spike in suicides during COVID-19 pandemic*. ABC 30 News. <https://abc30.com/coronavirus-suicide-covid-pandemic-fresno-county/6315879/>
- Peterson, Steve et al. "Projected Deaths of Despair During the Coronavirus Recession," Well Being Trust. May 8, 2020. [WellBeingTrust.org](https://www.wellbeingtrust.org/).

Notes: Data collection sources used in this brief did not collect gender data outside of the male/female binary, so we were unable to describe trends among other gender identities. Race/ethnicity data were from a combined field, so if an individual identified as Hispanic/Latinx, that was the reported race/ethnicity.

This brief was prepared by: Amanda Richman, MPH; Gerardo Mares, MA CJ; Vaynesia Kendrick, MS; Michael Stevenson, MPH; Rachel Lecher, MPH; Griselle Torres, DrPH, MPH, MSW; and Jeanette Kowalik, PhD, MPH, MCHES. Andrea Nauer-Waldschmidt and Prevent Suicide Greater Milwaukee also contributed to this brief.